

Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

HISTORICAL DEBRIS,

OR THE MYTHICAL AND THE FABULOUS IN HISTORY.

BY J. M. GUINN.

[Read April 5, 1894.]

"As for history, we know that is lies," said Sir Horace Walpole, or rather the expression is attributed to him, for even the authorship of the saying is in doubt. Whether it was Horace Walpole or Robert Walpole, or whether either of them gave utterance to it, is immaterial. While refusing my indorsement of so sweeping a charge against the reliability of historical narrative, yet I think that every student of history will admit that the more extensive his historical reading may become the less ready he will be to accept unquestioned that which is presented to him in the name of history.

The present age is irreverent and iconoclastic. Myths and traditions that have passed for ages as authentic history, have by the critical historian of our day been relegated to their proper place in literature. In the present age the truth-seeking historian, untrammeled by fear of church or state has weighed every fact and scrutinized every authority bearing upon the historical events under investigation, and the result has been that much that has passed for authentic history has been found to be mere rubbish—broken, displaced and distorted fragments of some myth or fable that the credulous historian has mistaken for veritable history instead of what they are—historical debris.

Scientists as well as historians have done effective work in ridding history of its debris. Scientific investigation has displaced many a lodgment of historical detritus that for centuries has clogged the channel of history. Huxley and his co-laborers have dried up the waters of the Noachian deluge far more quickly and effectively than did the fabled east wind. Lot's wife—that pillar of salt, that for two thousand years worried historian and theologian—has melted away before modern scientific investigation; and the Dead Sea, that engulfed Sodom and Gomorrah with its sulphurous waters, has been proven to be no dead sea at all—only a very ordinary alkaline lake.

Every student of history recognizes the value of myth and folk-lore in the study of the evolution of a people. But no historian worthy of the name should give currency to the mythical and fabulous as true history.

Intentional misrepresentation, hero worship, credulity and the bias of prejudice or favoritism, are the most fruitful sources from which have originated the falsehoods of history.

Ancient history abounds in fabulous and mythical stories, that for ages passed current as truthful history, The story of Diogenes, the cynic, in scant attire, searching the streets of Athens with a lantern at midday to find an honest man, does not appear in Grecian literature until long after Diogenes and his lantern (if he possessed one) were dust and ashes. It was doubtless originated by some carping cynic to add luster to the name of the founder of his school of philosophy.

The three hundred Spartan heroes who fell at the Pass of Thermopylæ have grown to seven thousand. To add luster to their heroic defense, Greek historians reduced the number of the defenders.

The praises of Regulus, that brave old Roman who would not break his word with his enemies though death might be his reward for keeping it, have been told in prose and sung in verse through all the centuries that have intervened since the days when Porcius Cato gave utterance to his famous slogan: *"Carthago est delenda"* (Carthage must be destroyed). Modern research has shown that Regulus, instead of returning to Carthage as he promised the Carthagenians to do, violated his word, staid at home and fired the Roman heart with tales of Carthagenian cruelty. Instead of being put to death by being rolled down hill in a barrel set with sharp spikes by the enraged Carthagenians, he died in Rome at an advanced age.

On good authority it has been shown that it was not love of country and liberty that inspired Brutus to thrust his "envious dagger" into Cæsar, but because Cæsar had made a decree that Brutus and his associates should not loan money at usurious rates. Brutus's rate of interest to his needy countrymen was forty-eight per cent.

Ferocious Omar, the Moslem conqueror, did not burn the great library of Alexandria. Modern investigation has shown that he never was at Alexandria and had he come there he would have found no library to burn. The library had been destroyed two and a-half centuries before Omar's time. Julius Cæsar burned a part of it and the Patriarchs of Alexandria completed the destruction of its 700,000 volumes.

Leaving ancient history, and coming down to modern, we find one of the most remarkable instances on record of a myth passing current for history. For five hundred years the Swiss had reverenced the mem-

ory of William Tell and had exalted him as the savior of their country and the deliverer of its people from bondage. His lime tree was pointed out in the market place of Altdorf and his crossbow hung in the arsenal at Zurich. Some iconoclastic historian, delving among the tomes and archives of Swiss and Austrian history, has proved, beyond a doubt, that the Swiss were never conquered by the Austrians; that there was no tyrant Gesler, that William Tell is a mythical personage and the story of his exploits in its general features is one of the myths that our Aryan ancestors are supposed to have brought with them from their mountainous homes in Central Asia.

It is only a few years past since the beautiful story of Pocahontas saving the life of Captain John Smith, ceased to be regarded as authentic history. The story as told in the histories of our boyhood days runs about as follows: King Powhatan in his great Council Chambers is seated on a wooden throne, with his two daughters, beautiful Indian princesses, beside him. Smith, the captive, is brought before him, is soundly berated for the sins of his countrymen, and doomed to die. The captive's head is placed on a great rock, and a stalwart brave swings high his war club. Pocahontas, the princess, moved by pity, dashes down from the throne and throws her arms around Smith's neck at the imminent risk of having her own beautiful head broken by the the war club. Powhatan is moved to pity. Smith is saved. That such a story should have passed current as truthful history for two centuries, in a country where Indian character and Indian customs were so well understood as they were in ours, is an anomaly in credulity. To anyone understanding Indian character and customs the story is a weak invention. No American Indian had then, or has now, any conception of kingly power, or of a throne. Their squaws were not admitted to the Council Chamber. Captives were usually burned at the stake with all the tortures that the untutored savage could invent, and foremost in inflicting these were the squaws, young and old. No Indian maiden would have dared to save a prisoner when doomed by the Council to die. Pocahontas was the daughter of a chief, Rolfe, who already had a wife in England, married her out of policy and with a hope of making a profit out of the Indian trade. She was regarded by the English as a princess, and King James and his Council gravely discussed the question whether Rolfe, a common subject with no royal blood in his viens, had committed treason by marrying a princess of the royal blood and an heir to the throne of Powhatan. They were ignorant of the fact that the chieftainship among Indian tribes was never conferred upon women; nor was it hereditary. The story was invented by Smith long after the death of Powhatan and Pocahontas. Had Smith lived in our day he would have made a fortune in writing dime novels.

Passing by the detritus of Colonial and Revolutionary history we hasten on to that greatest event in our nation's history—the Civil War. Fought as it was, during the last half of the nineteenth century, in an age of telegraphs, and newspapers, with every appliance for obtaining correct reports, we shall find no conflicting accounts, no fabulous stories to contradict, no myths woven into its history. Let us see. In the past thirty years every important battle has been fought over and over again on paper by survivors of the engagement. Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan on the one side, Lee, Davis, and Johnson on the other, have each told his story of the war, and columns and whole volumes of refutations have followed the appearance of each one's story. Thirty years have passed since Sherman's Legions marched through the Carolinas, and though argued through all the years since then, the question who burned Columbia is no nearer an answer now than that of the burning of Rome in the days of Nero.

The survivor of the late war, as he reads the historical descriptions of battles and sieges in which he took part, is sometimes compelled to doubt his senses and even his own identity. The special artist, the army correspondent, and the intelligent contraband were potent factors in the making of war news. To the war correspondent of a great newspaper, the columns of his paper were of more importance than the movements of the columns of an army. War news was manufactured by the correspondent, the more startling and improbable the bigger the scoop of his contemporaries. In the transition from news to history, not infrequently has it happened that the improbable has been substituted for the actual. That which did happen has been denied or forgotten, and that which did not happen has gone on the record as veritable history.

The artist's license, like the poet's, is highly elastic and often assists in the preservation and dissemmination of historical inaccuracies. My space permits me to give but one example from the many that might be given. It is an artist's attempt to depict a battle in which I took part, and which I saw, or think I saw, from inception to finish. In Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War, the illustrations for which purport to have been sketched on the field by special artists, appears a picture of the battle of Winchester, or Kernstown as it is now called. General Shields, mounted on a magnificent gray horse, epaulets on his shoulders, and a cocked hat on his head, with his drawn sword pointing to the Confederates, far in advance of his troops, is leading the charge. His horse is in the very act of leaping over a stone wall and a regiment of Stonewall Jackson's troops. The Union soldiers, dressed in perfect line, with knapsacks on their backs, overcoats buttoned to their throats, and bayonets at a charge, follow in the rear of the General. The context describing the battle is of a piece with the picture. The

facts are that Shields was wounded in a skirmish the day before and was in the hospital at Winchester, four miles from the battlefield; the artist was probably much further away. Shields never wore epaulets, nor a cocked hat; his usual uniform was an old blouse and a slouched hat. He did not command in any battle during the war, nor was he in a battle. There was not a general on the battlefield. The ranking officer on the field was Colonel (afterwards General) Kimball of the Fourteenth Indiana Volunteers—one of the founders of the Indiana Colony, now Pasadena. After stubbornly fighting Jackson's forces, which were posted behind a stone wall, for three hours, it occurred to some one that they could be flanked. Sullivan's brigade moved up on their right flank, their position was rendered indefensible and they began to fall back. Some one (supposed to be a corporal of the Seventh Ohio) yelled "Charge!" The cry ran through our irregular line and away we went on the run, every man in command of himself and all of us bound for the wall. Jackson's soldiers retreated. A number of them who could not run as fast as their pursuers were captured, and the battle was over. Both history and art credit the victory to the bravery and strategy of Shields. Strategy, there was none. The victory was won by the bravery of that thing which has no personality in history—the common soldier. Three colonels were made brigadiers as a reward for the bravery of the private soldiers in their respective commands.

The poet's license has played an important part in the originating and perpetuating of historical inaccuracies. As an illustration, take Buchanan Read's stirring poem, "Sheridan's Ride." It is a magnificent poem, but as history it is sadly misleading. The ride, while regarded by Sheridan as an insignificant performance, has from the rythm of Read's immortal lines, come to be considered the most wonderful of Sheridan's daring deeds. The actual distance from Winchester to where Sheridan saw, not

"The groups of stragglers and the retreating troops,"

but to where he saw General Wright's line of battle ready to advance on the enemy, was twelve miles, not twenty,

"And striking his spurs, with a terrible oath,
He dashed down the line mid a storm of huzzas,
And the wave of retreat was checked, because
The sight of the master compelled it to pause."

The "wave of defeat" was checked before Sheridan left Winchester. His presence, no doubt, inspired the troops who knew that he had arrived on the field, but many of them were not aware of his presence until after the Confederates were driven back and defeated.

Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade" has made the name of

that organization immortal. The superficial readers of history regard that charge as the bravest, the most deadly, and the most desperate in the annals of modern warfare. Stripped of the poetic imagery that Tennyson has woven into it, it was not such a wonderful charge after all. More than one hundred regiments on the Union side and a number on the Confederate, in our Civil War lost a higher percentage of killed and wounded in single engagements than did the Light Brigade at Balaklava. And these not only did this once but repeatedly, while the only fighting the Light Brigade ever did was its one foolish charge. The loss of the Light Brigade at Balaklava was thirty-six per cent. of those engaged. The loss of the First Minnesota Regiment at Gettysburg was eighty-two per cent. At least three members of our historical Society, Gen. Mansfield, Major E. W. Jones, and the writer of this paper, took part in charges in which the per cent. of killed and wounded in their respective regiments was nearly double that of the Light Brigade. "The Battle Above the Clouds" the poetical name for the battle of Lookout Mountain was no battle at all, only an insignificant skirmish in which the Union loss was nine men, while the battle of Missionary Ridge cost the Union Army seven thousand.

Instances of intentional misrepresentation of the facts of history are numerous, but my space forbids me giving more than one example. In the Century Magazine War Papers, which now form four large volumes of what purports to be history, is a paper by the Confederate General Imboden entitled "Stonewall Jackson in Shenandoah Valley." He gives, what he claims, is a full history of Jackson's movements and battles in the valley. He describes at length Jackson's victories over the armies of Hunter, Banks, Fremont, and Tyler but carefully avoids the slightest mention of Jackson's disastrous defeat by Shield's forces at Kernstown. As reliable history, many of the Century papers are worthless. They abound in biased statements, inaccuracies and intentional misrepresentations. The authors of some of these papers evidently seized this opportunity to vent their maglignant hatred of their late enemies, even though they had to falsify the truths of history to do it.

Contemporaneous histories are usually unreliable on account of the bias of their authors. The writer must pander to the prejudices of his constituents by abusing those of the opposite side if he would make his wares salable.

The element of the fabulous enters largely into all one sided histories of any great contest. The histories of the conquest of California abound in numerous examples of this. We never have had, and probably never will have, a history of that event written by a Mexican or native Californian. We look at it from the American side only. Most of the contemporaneous writers on the American side seem to have been in-

spired by two motives; first, to magnify the numbers, and, secondly, to debase the character of their opponents. Stockton's military and naval reports of the conquest of California abound in misrepresentations and fabulous stories. The Commodore was a veritable Munchausen, when narrating his own exploits. Stockton, in reporting his first expedition down the coast, reported that he had chased the Mexican army 300 miles along the coast, driven them into the interior and dispersed them in the mountains. Exactly how he, on board the frigate "Congress," out of sight of land, could chase the Mexican army over the mountains of the Coast Range, 300 miles down the coast, is a military and naval exploit that the Commodore does not explain. Tuthill (usually considered a reliable historian), describing Stockton's second expedition down this coast, says: "Stockton effected a landing of his troops at San Pedro on October 23 (1846), in the face of an army of 800 of the enemy." The story of Stockton's heroic exploit is told as follows by B. D. Wilson (who had been taken prisoner at the battle of Chino). Wilson was stationed on the mesa under the charge of a Mexican sergeant, with instructions to run up a white flag and under cover of that to bear a message from Jose Antonio Carillo, the officer in command, to Stockton, asking a cessation of hostilities. Carillo, with the intention of giving Stockton an exaggerated idea of his strength and thus obtaining more favorable terms, collected droves of wild horses from the plains; these his caballeros kept in motion passing and repassing through a gap in the hills which was plainly discernible from Stockton's vessel. Owing to the dust raised by the cavalcade, it was impossible to discover that most of the horses were riderless. The troops, who had landed, were signalled to return to the vessel, the anchors were hoisted and the Commodore sailed away to San Diego to join Fremont. Bancroft says: "Of the 800 men attributed to the enemy, 700 at least existed in the American imagination."

Stockton, in his official account of the battles of the Rio San Gabriel and the Plains of the Mesa (as he called it), gives the enemy's loss in killed and wonnded at between seventy and eighty. At the battle of Paso de Bartolo or Rio San Gabriel two Californians, Sepulveda and Ramirez, were mortally wounded and died a few days later at the Mission San Gabriel. At the battle of La Mesa, a Yaqui Indian named Ignaceo, was killed and one Californian wounded. Some American historians place the strength of the Californians in these battles at from one thousand to twelve hundred men. Their fighting strength was between three and four hundred. Stockton's was about six hundred, Tuthill, in his historical account of Stockton's first advance on Los Angeles, August, 1846, says: "As they neared the intrenched camp, a courier from Castro came out, kindly to warn them that the town would prove their

grave if they entered it. "Then," answered the Commodore, "Tell the General to have the bells ready to toll at eight o'clock as I shall be there at that time." Castro had no intrenched camp. He and his army had disappeared before Stockton's arrival. Tuthill states that Gillespie, when driven out of Los Angeles by Flores took up his line of march for Monterey—a slight error of only 300 miles in Gillespie's destination, and yet, Tuthill's history, before Bancroft's appeared, was regarded as the most reliable history of California extant.

As an illustration of the unreliability of contemporaneous history when the evidence of only one side is heard, I give this from Dr. John Frost's Pictorial History of California, written a year after the close of the Mexican War. After describing Stockton's landing at San Pedro on his first expedition down the coast, and the advance of his army against Castro's forces at Los Angeles, he gives this account of a battle: "At the Rancho Sepulvida a large force of Californians were posted. Commodore Stockton sent one hundred men forward to receive the fire of the enemy, and then fall back on the main body without returning it. The main body of Stockton's army was formed in a triangle, with the guns hid by the men. By the retreat of the advance party the enemy were decoyed close to the main force, when the wings (of the triangle) were extended and a deadly fire from the artillery opened upon the astonished Californians. More than one hundred were killed, the same number wounded; Castro's army was routed and one hundred prisoners taken." The mathematical accuracy of Stockton's artillerists was truly astonishing. They killed a man for every one wounded and took a prisoner for every man killed—a very remarkable battle indeed. Castro's whole army did not exceed 300 men and as these all ran away they all lived to fight (or run) another day. The first capture of Los Angeles was accomplished without the firing of a gun. Capron, the author of a history of California, who visited the state in 1850, and spent several years here, describes the same battle. He calls it the battle of Rancho La Sepulvidad. He puts Castro's loss at one hundred killed, and one hundred prisoners, but says nothing about the wounded. "Dead men tell no tales;" Capron was safe from contradiction by the dead, and the wounded, if there were any, concealed their scars. Dr. John Frost was a noted compiler of histories, and in his day was regarded as an historical authority. He wrote LL.D. after his name. From what source he derived his information in regard to this battle he does not state. There was not then, nor is there now, a Rancho Sepulvida between Los Angeles and the sea, and consequently no such battle there nor at any other place in California.

Historical accuracy is a thing of slow growth. It is only by a careful collection of evidence and the testimony of many witnesses, gathered through years of tedious search, that a true verdict establishing an his-

torical fact is reached. The historian should possess the judicial instinct for weighing evidence and arriving at a decision unbiased either by prejudice or favoritism. He should possess enough honesty and independence to expose fasehoods, even when they have the official stamp of church or state.

In conclusion, pardon a slight digression from my subject. Californians owe a debt of gratitude to Hubert Howe Bancroft for his historical work. His history has its defects. What history has not? He may have dealt severely, and even unfairly, with certain historical personages. Possibly some of these deserved a little severity. His energy, industry and perseverance in collecting vast stores of historical material, that but for him would have been lost and destroyed, as much had been before his time, are deserving of praise. He has gathered together material from which some future Macaulay will write a true history of the State. His recent expulsion from the society of California Pioneers reflects no credit on that somewhat discordant body. Bancroft will be remembered with gratitude by future generations.